

Who Is Tony Stark?

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It's a typical day in Manhattan. Cars, people, noise, life. Is it any wonder I love New York? I'm a little disappointed that I can't just find a bench, sit back, and watch the world roll by. But I'm a man with a mission. A man with a question.

"Excuse me, miss," I say. "My name is Art Shannon. I'm a reporter with the Times. I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time."

The woman looks at me warily. She seems to be in her mid-thirties, is slightly overweight, has frizzy red hair and thick glasses. The kind of person you'd find behind the counter at the DMV. "Well, I kinda have to get to workâ€¦" she says in a suspicious and nervous voice.

"It will just take a moment. I only have one question. Please, Missâ€¦?"

"Fedderman. Jessica Fedderman. And I guess it's all right as long as it's just one question."

I can see in her eyes that she's thinking about seeing her name in the paper. Amazing what the idea of a little fame can do to loosen a person's tongue, isn't it? "Thanks. Here goes. What do you think of

Tony Stark and Iron Man?"

It only takes her a second to respond. "I don't have any feelings about Iron Man one way or the other. But my two boys worship the ground he and the rest of the Avengers walk on. I'm not really sure if that's healthy.

"As for Tony Stark, I've never meet the man so I can't really judge. All I know is that I'm a single mother trying to get by and raise my sons right in this crazy city. I don't think someone like Mr. Stark has any idea of the kind of problems I face everyday."

"Thank you. You've been very helpful," I respond.

"When is your story coming out?" she asks. "The girls at work would just die if they new I was going to be in the Times."

I try to keep my expression blank. The old saying really is true--fame is the worst drug. "Sometime soon. You see, I'm going to spend a week going around the city asking people what I just asked you. It's for a special edition the paper is putting out on the Fantastic Four and The Avengers returning."

"I'll be sure to pick it up," she says. "By the way, it's Fedderman with two D's."

"Two D's," I repeat, trying not to smile. "Again, thank you. You've been more helpful than you'll ever know."

And that's how it started. Over the next week I was all over Manhattan and the outer burrows. I lost count of the people I talked to. Everyone had a unique perspective. Still, some of those interviews stuck in my mindâ€¦

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Officially, it's called West Mid-Town. But to you, me, and everyone else in New York, it's Hell's Kitchen. Thanks to the economy taking an upswing, some new enforcement tactics by the NYPD, and the tireless efforts of a creation masked vigilante, crime in this neighborhood has been going down lately. Places that used to crackhouses are now restaurants. More kitchen, less Hell. Works for me.

It was here that I met Karen Page. She's blonde, late twenties, and a real knockout. She says she works in radio. I have to admit, the voice sounds familiar but I can't think from exactly where.

"What do I think off Tony Stark?" she says. "Well, his company has done a lot for this city. Especially the victims of Onslaught. But there is one thing I wonder about him and Iron Man."

"What's' that?" I probe.

"Their personal lives. Iron Man's more than Stark's. Everyone knows that Tony Stark is never out of arms reach of a glass of champagne and a beautiful woman. But what about Iron Man? Does he have a girlfriend? A wife? Kids?

"And if he does what kind of strain does his job put on those

relations? How much time does he spend with his loved ones after he's done protecting Stark and being an Avenger? If he does have someone he cares about how does he balance their needs with those of his job?"

"You raise some strong points, Ms. Page," I concede. "It can't be easy living two lives like that."

"No, I can't imagine it is," she says, accidentally letting a bit of fire slip into her voice.

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I was standing outside Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn when I meet Alan Hauger. Alan is short, in his early seventies, has gray hair, thick glasses, and walks with cane. He looks like the living embodiment of the word "grandpa." He was more than willing to talk to me. After I listened to a few stories about his grandchildren, of course.

"Tony Stark, eh?" he says. "My oldest boy worked for his company for quite some time. He never meet the man, but my boy, David is his name, seemed to respect him a great deal."

"Now Iron Man, well, Captain America wouldn't let him be an Avenger if he was just some mercenary like some people say, now would he? Cap saved my whole unit back in the Big One. Most amazing thing I ever did see. The Captain fighting that is."

Suddenly Hauger became very quiet if he was trying to remember something. "Sir?" I say.

"Oh! Sorry, Mr. Shannon. I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"About how the world has changed. About how the heroes have changed and how they haven't. About how they just don't make 'em like the Captain anymore."

"These new folk, Alpha Flight, the New Warriors, and your Iron Man, they all have some of the Spirit. Not as much as the Captain, but a good amount," he says.

"The Sprit? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"The Heroic Spirit! The spirit to fight for what is right!" proclaims the old man. "The willingness to lay your life down for a good cause!"

He calms down after a moment. "Sorry. Got a bit overexcited. It's just that I saw a lot of that spirit during the war. That's why I was here at the cemetery. Paying my respects to some of the boys whoâ€¦|..didn't get to come home."

I stand there slightly in awe of this little man and the power of his words. "Thank you mister Hauger. What you said really meant something to me."

"Please, call me Alan."

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"You work for the \_Times\_, huh? I don't know if I should be talking to you. I do a lot of freelance work for the Bugle and J.J.J. would have my head on a pike if he thought I'd been, as he might say, 'consorting with the enemy.'"

I was on the campus of Empire State University in Greenwich Village when I met my current interviewee. The guy's name is Peter Parker and he's in his early twenties, tall, dark hair, the all-American guy.

"I'll keep whatever you say completely anonymous if you want," I promise.

"Well, if you keep it anonymous, okay. I really admire Tony Stark. Most people only think of him as a corporate player but he's not," says Parker. "What everyone seems to forget is that he's also a brilliant inventor. Most of the products Stark Industries produced were based on work by Stark himself. Of course, he doesn't own Stark Industries anymore, but I think he'll do great things with Stark Solutions."

"And what about Iron Man?" I ask.

Parker gets a real serious look on his face as he answers. "Anyone who says Iron Man is just a mercenary is full of it. I've taken a few pictures of him and the Avengers in my time, and I know they're good people. If I was a superhero I'd be proud to stand by Iron Man's side anytime!"

The conviction in his voice is strong. I'm not sure why, but I can't help but think that if Peter Parker ever did get superpowers he'd make one amazing hero.

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Near Shea Stadium in Queens I caught a cab driven by one Larry Kagen. He's in his early thirties, has dark hair and a mustache, and is wearing a T-shirt that reads "Nuke the Whales!" Larry is a guy who has a lot of opinions and isn't afraid to share them.

"Crooks!" Larry bellows. "They're both crooks! Stark and that Iron Man guy should be locked up and left to rot!"

"Why do you say that?" I ask, knowing I'm in for an earful.

"Stark is like all rich guys. He thinks all that money of his makes it so that the law don't apply to him. I mean, this is a guy who gave Congress, stinkin' Congress, the brush-off one time!

"I'm telling you that Stark is up to something. Why else would his old company have made as those weird weapons for those S.H.I.E.L.D. guys? It's gotta be some kinda conspiracy I tell ya! A conspiracy!"

I take a second to look at the situation I'm in. A reporter and a cabby with a thing for conspiracy theories. I think I've seen this movie.

"And Iron Man, the dirty merc, is even worse!" continues Kagen. "Playing superhero for a paycheck. What kind of message does that send to kids? Hey, I'll give you a perfect example. Remember when Iron Man fought Titanium Man over in that neutral country, Alberia?"

"Yes, I do seem to recallâ€¦"

"\$49.95 on pay-per-view! You can bet Stark's boy got a real nice slice of that pie!"

I don't know what to say. All I want is some place to get my head in order.

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If you're in Manhattan and need a quiet place for serious thinking, I can't recommend a better place than the Sheep's Meadow in Central Park. Here there is nothing but green grass as far as the eye can see. With one notable exception. A sculpture put up by the city to the memory of the Fantastic Four and Avengers after everyone thought they had been killed by Onslaught.

This is the first chance I've had to see it in person. The sculpture shows Captain America's, Mr. Fantastic's, and Thor's arms bursting upwards from a rock. Cap's hand holds his shield while Thor's has his hammer. On the front is a plaque with the names of the supposedly fallen and some words to their memory. Standing in front of the sculpture, running her hands over the plaque, is a beautiful young blonde woman. It only takes me a moment to recognize her.

"Of course I'd be happy to answer your questions, Mr. Shannon." says Alicia Masters. "After all, my work as a sculptress and my friendship with the Fantastic Four has allowed me the pleasure of meeting both Tony Stark and Iron Man."

"I'd appreciate hearing anything you have to say," I reply.

"Tony Stark has always struck me as a very good man. Someone who, despite his wealth and power, knows what it is to struggle with all the problems life can throw at a person.

"I've always seen Iron Man as a hero, pure and simple. When I first met him, I sensed that under that mask is a person who cares deeply for others and truly wants to make the world a better place. He and Tony Stark really complement each other.

"Mr. Shannon, do you mind if Iâ€¦" Alicia says as she holds out her arms in the way blind people do when they want to touch someone's face.

"Of course."

"Thank you."

Her fingers spend a few seconds running over my face. Then she takes them away and gives me a dazzling smile.

"You're a good person, Mr. Shannon. By talking to you and touching your

face, I can tell you've had a lot of pain in your life but have come through it. You're looking for something at this point in your life, aren't you?"

"You're not psychic are you?"

"No, you're thinking of that red-haired woman from the X-Men," jokes Alicia. "I'm just a good judge of character."

"Thanks. Being called a good person is the nicest thing anyone has said to me in a very long time."

"I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for, Mr. Shannon."

"So do I, Miss Masters. So do I."

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If anyone was to walk into this bathroom right now they would see what looks like someone ripping their face off. The truth is I'm just wearing a mask. It's one of those heavy makeup jobs Hollywood is so famous for. If you were wearing one of these things your best friend would never recognize you.

The mask finally comes off. Good, because I want to recognize myself. I want to see my true face. The face of Tony Stark.

I look down at the Art Shannon mask in my hand. It's just the newest in a long line of masks I have worn, and I have worn many. Inventor, spoiled millionaire, adventurer, alcoholic, businessman, leader, lady's man, Avenger. I've worn so many masks in my life that it's become almost impossible for me to tell who I really am. That's why I've spent a lot of time asking myself the question "Who is Tony Stark?"

I leave the bathroom and head to my big, black couch. It was on this couch, here in Stark Tower, that I came up with the idea to form Stark Solutions. It's a great place to think, and thinking is what I need to do. Outside the moonlight shines down on the city.

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Something wakes me from a sleep I did not even know I was in. Lucky for me this couch is great for naps or I'd have one very stiff neck. Judging from the light coming from the windows, I'd say it's just before dawn.

I go out my balcony and look down at Manhattan's Flatiron district. Even at this hour there are people buzzing about. This truly is the city that never sleeps. That's when the light catches my eyes. It's the first rays of the morning sun.

The light feels good on my skin--as if it was recharging me. In a way this is what the whole Art Shannon project was about. To recharge my faith in myself as a man and as a hero. It took me awhile, but I found that faith. In the words of a blind woman of all places.

The sun shines brightly as New York City and its people gear up for another day. I find it strange that I'm in such a good mood even

thought I still haven't completely answered the question of who Tony Stark really is. But for the moment I'm not concerned about that. All I can think about is how it's going to be a beautiful day in the city I love.

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The end

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